Ethnography

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Introduction
Worlds of journalism

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ABSTRACT ■ In this article we briefly review past and present ethnography of journalism in order to explain the timing and significance of this special issue, 'Worlds of Journalism'. We make the case for the ethnography of journalism as a key lens for better understanding four sets of research problems facing contemporary social science: (1) the involvement of media professions like journalism in processes of social mediation and cultural production more broadly, (2) the opportunity of reflexive social science to 'study sideways' other professional groups through ethnography, (3) the contemporary transformation of institutions and practices of political communication, democracy and citizenship, and (4) the emergence of new modes of translocal social experience such as those experienced by mobile, cosmopolitan professional groups.

KEY WORDS ■ ethnography, political communication, professionals, reflexivity, cosmopolitanism

It is with great pleasure that we introduce this special issue of *Ethnography*, 'Worlds of Journalism'. The two of us have felt for some time that journalism is a particularly timely and fertile topic for social-scientific reflection, and for several reasons. Some of these reasons are obvious: the

saturation of so many other theaters of social experience with the products of journalistic activity, for example, raises questions about the lives, crafts, and intentions of the producers, about how particular messages are negotiated, written, circulated, and why. Other reasons may seem important at first only to those who know a little about the behind-the-scenes of mass media in the 21st century. Suffice it to say that there are major changes afoot in journalism in the era of digital media technologies and increased industrial concentration. Journalists would be the first to tell you that the future paths and forms of journalism are far from certain. They wonder about the fate of journalistic agency in a new technical ecology of mediation, they are concerned about journalistic objectivity at a moment when partisan journalism, PR spin and 'consumer-friendly' writing seem to be on the upswing, and some even express worries about the health of political culture in the age of sound-bites, fragmented audiences, and increased commercial pressures upon mainstream media work. Such concerns are, at once, specific to journalism as a kind of professional intellectual activity and perhaps also indicative of the shifting sands upon which all professional intellectuals and their cultures of expertise now stand in a time of intense marketization, communicational innovation, and enhanced translocal social relations.

Although the future of journalism is indeed far from certain, it seems likely that the future lives and crafts of journalists will have implications for us all, not least since so much of our own knowledge of the world 'out there' is filtered through the work of journalists (Hannerz, 2004a: 23–9). With so many important questions on the table, it seems to us a good time for two sorts of stock-taking: first, greater inquiry into the contemporary settings, values, and practices of journalism across the world with special attention paid to how journalism is changing and why. Second, reflection upon what greater ethnographic inquiry into journalism offers social sciences like anthropology, sociology, and, not least, what it offers journalism itself. The articles in this collection therefore both engage the experiential reality of contemporary journalism and consider seriously the challenges and opportunities at the heart of the ethnography of media, a project that is reflexive to the core in its practice of representing practices of representation.

Another factor that inspired us to organize this issue is more locally academic. Although ethnographic and social-theoretical engagements of journalism are certainly nothing new (e.g. Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1974, 1978; Tunstall, 1971), these fields have rapidly developed over the past 15 years into a larger and more energetic community of scholarship, precisely as social sciences like anthropology and sociology seek to gain meaningful, experiential traction on research-objects like 'globalization' by studying what we might term social 'practices of mediation' or 'mediating labors'

(Boyer, 2001). This recent anthropological and sociological research on journalism has begun to unpack the significance of such mediating labors for the pathways of the global cultural ecumene (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1992), offering important insights, for example, into the social practices of reporting that lie at the heart of global news networks (Hannerz, 1998, 2004a; Pedelty, 1995); into the relationship of media and political culture (Bourdieu, 1996; Hasty, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2005); into the microsociology of newsrooms, writing and editorial practices (Marchetti and Ruellan, 2001; McNair, 1998; Peterson, 2001; Ståhlberg, 2002); and into the participation of journalism in the objectification and accreditation of certain schemes of social knowledge (Boyer, 2000; Reed, 2005). In this way, ethnographies of journalism have contributed to a broader social-scientific engagement of everyday cultures of expertise across the media professions, including, most notably, advertising (Mazzarella, 2003; Moeran, 1996); art (Bourdieu, 1993); marketing (Applbaum, 2004); media activism (Ginsburg, 2002; McLagan, 2002); televisual production (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Dornfeld, 1998); and so on. Indeed, one finds among these interlocutors similar senses of hope, anxiety, agency and contingency to those expressed within journalistic cultures as well.

In the remainder of this introduction, we make the case (briefly) for the importance of the ethnography of journalism for at least four more specific sets of questions facing contemporary social science:

1 the relationship of media professionalism to social mediation;
2 the analytic and ethnographic potentials of reflexive social science;
3 contemporary transformations of political communication and knowledge; and
4 the emergence of broader zones and scales of the translocal social experience.

These questions are not, in our opinion, the limits of what we can learn from the worlds of journalism, but rather serve as useful points of conceptual departure that have emerged from the ethnography of journalism itself.

Media professionals and mediation

At one level, the ethnography of journalism, like the ethnography of other modes of media professionalism, contributes to social-scientific studies of media, a greater appreciation for the place of human agency in processes of social mediation. As Boyer argues elsewhere (2006), social-scientific analyses of media tend to cluster around two poles of analysis: (1) considering media, in essence, as instruments of human representational and epistemic capacities (e.g. Ginsburg, 2002; Turner, 1992); or (2) considering human representational and epistemic capacities as fundamentally

conditioned by social technologies and ecologies of media themselves (e.g. Kittler, 1999; Luhmann, 2000; McLuhan, 1964). There is an obvious complementarity to these *instrumental* and *medial* approaches to understanding media insofar as they invert one another's core emphases. Perhaps it is even possible to understand their complementary polarity as the fruit of attempting to understand a social phenomenon as abstract as 'media' or 'mediation' in the first place. In other words, the subject of mediation is paralyzing enough in its scope to invite theoretical knowledge that is organized in terms of a general, bipolar schema.

Most ethnographers of media would agree that such theoretical polarity actually undermines their empirical-experiential sense that both instrumental and medial forces significantly converge in most real-world situations of media communication, circulation and reception. Confirming this, the ethnography of journalists offers more fine-grained insights, on the one hand, into the *mediating practices of representation and circulation* without which there would be no media, and, on the other, into the *institutional and professional schemes* and *technical instrumentaria* that wreathe, suffuse, and to some extent set conditions of possibility on the mediating labors of journalism. This social and historical zone of intersection between the practical and the institutional-technical is precisely where the purer modes of instrumental and medial arguments concerning media tend to be least distinct and helpful. It is our sense that the kinds of research profiled in this special issue can help – in conjunction with more general models of media function and efficacy to be sure – to offer a more complete and refined approach to studying processes of social mediation and mass communication.

To put this point more concretely, what we argue here is that the final forms that news messages take, are largely dependent on the micro-labors of research, information selection, collegial coordination, and editorial conversation that constitute their crafting. On the other hand, they are likewise co-constituted by the professional training that a journalist has completed; by the conceptions of journalism as a vocation s/he has absorbed; by the on-the-job apprenticeship in the craft offered by colleagues; by institutional expectations for productivity, efficiency, loyalty, and comportment; by the necessary interaction with 'real-time' technical systems of information transmission and management; and so on. As Jennifer Hasty notes in this issue, there is 'no news without "culture"', that is, without 'strategically motivated … understandings of locality'. Or, as Olav Velthuis (this issue) puts it, one must remember that 'mediation is itself mediated' by the settings, institutions and practices of journalism. Journalists themselves are certainly aware of the various social dimensions of the practice of journalism, albeit differentially on an individual basis. The ethnographer works from within the social space of journalism to help

retrieve and coordinate this knowledge, to understand the rhythms, relations and textures of everyday professional experience, both inside and outside of newsrooms.

Reflexivity and 'studying sideways'

As with approaches to studying media, the idea of reflexivity tends to show up primarily at two levels in present-day anthropology and sociology. On the one hand, as various thinkers would point out, such as Anthony Giddens (e.g. 1990), reflexivity is an overarching characteristic of modernity (or perhaps we would now prefer to say modernities, in the plural form). Society is engaged in monitoring itself, scrutinizing itself, portraying itself in a variety of ways, and feeding the resulting understandings back into organizing its activities. On the other hand, reflexivity, at least since the 1980s, has been identified, rather more intimately, as central to ethnographic work: we concern ourselves with our conduct in the field, with the relationships there between self and others, with the ways we write or otherwise report.

Studying the practices of journalism clearly relates to reflexivity in both these senses. The kinds of research discussed in the articles in this issue show journalism as a major form of organized, continuous reflexivity in the contemporary world. Again, in no small part it is through the intricately organized, widely dispersed, continuous work of journalists that people get the materials for their conceptions of the circumstances of human life and of the stream of human activities. That is certainly a very strong reason for attending critically to this complex mode of institutionalized global scrutiny.

Yet in doing ethnographies of journalistic practices, we are also reflexively engaged in 'studying sideways' (Hannerz, 1998, 2004a: 3–4). Over the years, much classic ethnographic work has involved 'studying down', throwing light on the ways of life of people less powerful and privileged than the researchers themselves. Some decades ago now, Laura Nader (1972) made the important call for 'studying up', as part of a reinvention of anthropology, to understand the sources, structures and activities of power. Studying journalism may be a part of that, insofar as the reach and the impact of media messages may be considerable. Not least, however, we study sideways, in the sense that we investigate a craft in some ways parallel to our own.

From this point of view, learning about how journalists work can also provide comparative perspectives for thinking about ethnography and its renewal. Perhaps the most common, and often less reflected, reaction to finding some grouping of others doing somehow similar, related work, which could even be mistaken for one's own, is to view that grouping as

one of competitors or adversaries, and to emphasize differences, and try to draw sharp boundaries. No doubt the relationship between academics and journalists has been marked by such tendencies, and anthropologists and sociologists seem often almost instinctively critical of journalism. Certainly the differences are not negligible, but it seems that there is now an increasing readiness to explore parallels amd similarities, and recognize, across the boundary, possible solutions to shared problems. As anthropologists turn to complex and often less than transparent social situations, they may find that their polymorphous styles of research may come to resemble those of investigative journalists in certain ways. When it comes to forms of presentation, it is hardly sheer coincidence that anthropological self-consciousness about writing since the 1980s has developed alongside debates and experiments beginning with the 'New Journalism' of the 1970s. As a recent volume of *The New New Journalism* (Boynton, 2005) proclaims that 'ours is an age of non-fiction', one of the more prominent practitioners interviewed, Ted Conover, notes that he was an anthropology student in college, and that anthropology 'dovetails with journalism in fascinating and productive ways' (Boynton, 2005: 7).

In a Swedish volume on anthropology and journalism, a number of anthropologists who also have varied backgrounds in professional journalism (including Per Ståhlberg, contributor to this issue) have come together to discuss similarities and differences (Hannerz, 2004b). Of course, they note, the relationship to time is for one thing often different – the anthropologists, like academics generally, are slower to report, but have a chance to do so in greater depth and with more precision. Yet there is perhaps a tendency here for academics to contrast their style of work too narrowly with the more celebrated, and notorious, style of parachute journalism – the reporter covering a beat for a local newspaper may accumulate a detailed understanding of a place and its people, and may be perfectly capable of presenting the native's point of view.

Political communication and public culture

This sort of detailed understanding, when applied to the places and people involved in mass media production, is helpful in another respect as well. One debate that is widespread in contemporary media studies concerns how contemporary industrial and technological trends in news media are affecting political communication and democracy. Although this debate straddles academic and activist research, its main coordinates are strikingly in line with Habermas's classic treatise on the decline of bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992). One set of voices in this debate is uncompromisingly critical of contemporary corporate consolidation of

media ownership and predicts dire consequences for western (especially American) democracy as its sphere of political communication becomes infiltrated and coordinated by political and industrial interests (see, e.g. Bagdikian, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; McChesney, 1997, 2004). Meanwhile others have sought to develop a more differentiated approach to contemporary transformations in political communication, at times eliding, at times returning to portraits of crisis and decline (e.g. Bennet and Entman, 2001; Clark, 2000; Mejias, 2001; Schudson, 1997; Warner, 2002; Winokur and Hazen, 1997).

Ethnography of journalism offers material that, at least in part, vindicates critical studies of contemporary political communication. Indeed, in this issue, Velthuis's ethnography of 'spin' at the WTO or Amahl Bishara's analysis of status inequities between Palestinian and foreign journalists, might confirm the worst suspicions of how clientelism and hegemony organize and afflict the international news industry. Yet, at the same time, ethnography of journalism complicates narratives of journalistic crisis and redemption that pit an abstract system of 'capitalism' or a set of pernicious political interests against heroic media reformers. We find that the professional and situational realities facing journalists often are more complex and less easily moralized than such portraits suggest. Indeed, the limitations faced by Velthuis's reporters, for example, are more immediately attuned to the social institutions and rituals of political publicity and to the kinds of quid pro quo exchange-relationships that develop around them. Elsewhere, the 'house style' that Hasty identifies at a Ghanaian newspaper involves service to the state to be sure, but it also draws upon African traditions of public oratory that are not reducible to the legitimation of state power in their cultural extensions. Likewise, the emerging frontiers of news journalism that Olivier Baisnée and Dominique Marchetti document at *Euronews* cannot be interpreted solely as the necessary effect of external industrial or technical or political forces. Although such forces exist and are efficacious, it is within the institutional spaces and professional practices of media organizations that they ultimately develop their characteristic social processes and forms. In other words, practice is never trivial even where it is normatively trivialized. A serious activist social science of political communication could profit from greater attention to the ethnography of journalism. There is little hope of directed social change in the public sphere without an empirically acute sense of why media-making is what it is today and how journalists understand, implement and justify their social practices.

Translocality and cosmopolitanism

Finally, we come to the question of engaging social life at broader scales. Journalism can be a very local practice, where the reporter may move about intensively but within a quite limited territory, and where the audience may already be fairly well informed, and have strong opinions about, what is offered as 'news'. The Swedish anthropologist Staffan Löfving has reminisced (in Hannerz, 2004b) about how he and his colleagues, as eager young journalists on a small provincial newspaper, were encouraged by a newly arrived editor to try a brisker approach to reporting, more characteristic of metropolitan afternoon tabloids. Hoping to increase street sales, they tried new and striking angles to local stories – and the result was rather that a number of irate long-time readers canceled their subscriptions. They already had too much local knowledge to find the new angles credible, and may moreover have been offended by breaches against established definitions of the local order.

Nonetheless, journalism is often among those sociocultural phenomena which contribute to the current translocalization, transnationalization, and cosmopolitanism of contemporary life. Even as practiced quite locally, as Per Ståhlberg suggests, the craft and occupational ideology of journalism can be remarkably similar across borders and between continents. Moreover, much news work is involved in long-distance relationships and communication flows. One can hardly be an 'informed citizen' of the world without being greatly dependent on the work of journalists – even as the precise form of that dependence may now be changing quickly, with new modes of organization and new technology. That news work may allow some people to feel somewhat 'at home in the world', with a sense that they know what is going on; or at least a clearer sense of knowing what they do not know. Others, consuming other kinds of news and commentary, or getting it framed in another way, or simply consuming less of it, may be more likely to find themselves in a landscape of uncertainty and fear. We know that journalists, and editor-gatekeepers, can play their part, unintentionally or willingly, in making different responses among readers, viewers or listeners more or less likely.

One reason for developing the ethnographic study of journalism is to give audiences some of the interpretive and critical skills needed to understand and evaluate reporting from elsewhere, from milieux not familiar from first-hand experience. As multilocal and translocal research has quickly become a more common way of going about ethnography (e.g. Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995), ways of linking the different localities involved in a study have been summarized for example as 'following the people', or 'following the thing', or 'following the metaphor'. In the ethnography of journalism, 'following the story' must often be a fruitful approach.

We catch glimpses of it here and there in the articles which follow: in Bishara's portrayal of Palestinian journalists' important role in reporting from the Occupied Territories, often made invisible in final published accounts; in Velthuis's tracing of a story in the *International Herald Tribune* back to the events and encounters at the WTO meeting in Geneva where it originated; and even in Ståhlberg's passing mention of those few but memorable occasions when local journalists, whether in India or Sweden, found themselves suddenly making world news. Such analyses 'following a story' may become intriguingly complex as one realizes that after a local interplay of interests and competences at the point of origin, a story may bounce back and forth between stringers, bureaus and desks in different locations, involve competitions between parallel intermediary channels of news flow, translations and reinterpretations at different points of the passage, and then final editing before reaching its audience destination. We see interesting possibilities for a versatile media ethnography here.

Exploring the worlds of journalism

Finally, we would like to conclude this introduction by paying well-deserved praise to our contributing authors. Read together, these articles are the best testament to what the ethnography of journalists' works and worlds can offer media studies and beyond. By comparing the everyday practices of journalism in India and Sweden, Ståhlberg explores the ratio of global ideas and methods of journalism with its inevitable attunement to, and contingency upon, local institutions of political and public culture. Bishara offers a different kind of comparative perspective by analysing the kinds of cultural brokerage and interdependency that order the practice of international news journalism in a place, Palestine, that has been a hotspot of news coverage for decades. Hasty brings the problem of genres and discourse-styles of news-making to the fore and shows how African and western principles of publicity intertwine in Ghanaian journalism. Baisnée and Marchetti give us, meanwhile, a glimpse of one future of news journalism, of the practical and institutional transformations of journalism involved in a 24-hour, 'real-time' news organization. Finally, Velthuis takes us into the corridors and lounges of international economic news journalism – where journalists wait for press conferences to begin, wrestle with opaque technical language, navigate continuous efforts of political spin, and participate in the collegial coordination of representation, all in order to file stories that will inform and capture the attention of readers.

With these compasses in hand, we wish you well as 'parachutists' into the worlds of journalism and hope that the experience will inspire you to look at the everyday artifacts of journalism around you in new ways.

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